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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000387

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/17/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RABBI LAZAR ON SYNAGOGUE ATTACK, IMPORTANCE OF
TOLERANCE PROGRAMS

REF: MOSCOW 00262

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a January 17 meeting with the Ambassador, Berl Lazar, one of the leaders of Russia's Jewish community, said that though concerns about extremism in the country had been mounting, the January 11 synagogue attack had been a "wake-up call." He said the incident offered opportunities for the U.S. to offer the Russians cooperation and thus strengthen U.S.-Russian ties. Above all, he described plans for the Jewish community to build a museum in Moscow dedicated to promoting tolerance and suggested the USG could help in that effort. Though the details of Lazar's proposals remain unclear, his push for bilateral cooperation in fighting extremism warrants our attention. END SUMMARY.

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WAKE-UP CALL

¶2. (C) Rabbi Berl Lazar, one of two claimants to the title of Chief Rabbi of Russia, began the January 17 meeting by expressing appreciation for the Ambassador's January 13 visit to the synagogue where the attack had occurred, saying that that visit had sent a strong message to the GOR, Russia's Jewish community and others. Noting that he would continue to stress to senior GOR officials the importance of combating extremism in Russia, the Ambassador praised Lazar's public comments, made in the aftermath of the attack, about the growing extremist threat in the country.

¶3. (C) Although he had long been aware that extremism was a growing threat in Russia, Lazar said that the synagogue attack had nonetheless been a wake-up call. While he had condemned extremist attacks in the past, Lazar said that the extent of the problem had only now become apparent to him. The Jewish community was also scared, Lazar continued, noting that many of its members had told psychiatrists of their fears in meetings arranged by his synagogue following the attack. He also had spoken to Russia's chief Mufti, who reported that the Muslim community was also deeply worried. In addition to his public statements, Lazar had met over the past days with State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov and others to underscore his concern. His interlocutors had gotten the message, Lazar insisted.

¶4. (C) President Putin was also concerned, Lazar said. Putin favored tolerance and religious freedom, although his ability to promote it was limited by the political influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In Lazar's view, Putin was frustrated by excessive ROC influence and would be willing to do more.

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OPPORTUNITY FOR COOPERATION

15. (C) The synagogue attack had created an opportunity to foster U.S.-Russian cooperation in the fight against extremism, a non-political issue where the GOR might be responsive, Lazar continued. Saying that he would meet with President Putin within the next two weeks, Lazar said he would focus on two proposals:

-- Given that the synagogue attacker had reportedly been influenced in part by extremist Internet sites, Lazar said that dealing with promoting hatred over the Internet was an area of potential cooperation. The U.S. was grappling with similar problems, and offering to share experiences might be welcomed by the GOR.

-- Lazar also said he was developing a museum or center designed to combat extremism, along the lines of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. The Moscow city government had already provided a site in Moscow worth some USD 15 million for the project, and Putin had expressed support. The Jewish community would lead in this effort, but the museum would address all forms of extremism, not just anti-Semitism, Lazar said. German Chancellor Merkel had reacted positively when Lazar had met her during her recent visit, he reported. Lazar asked the Ambassador for support in the effort.

16. (C) Emphasizing the importance of seizing the moment, the Ambassador praised Lazar's desire to foster new initiatives. Extremism was an international phenomenon, the Ambassador stressed, and the Kremlin should not feel threatened by the possibility of cooperating in combating it. The Ambassador noted that the USG already had tolerance programs in Russia, and added that new initiatives were likely to be most well received if the Kremlin saw itself as playing a leading role.

MOSCOW 00000387 002 OF 002

Reiterating his interest in pursuing the effort, the Ambassador asked that Lazar keep him posted about progress on the initiatives, including Putin's reactions to them.

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COMMENT

17. (C) Lazar has long been criticized as downplaying the extent of xenophobia in Russia. Judging by his public statements, as well as his remarks to the Ambassador, Lazar now sees the issue differently and will be more outspoken. Despite his recent comments, Lazar will likely retain the good contacts he has long enjoyed in the Kremlin, and he appears well placed to pursue his initiatives. We believe they may be worth supporting, at least to some extent, in order both to help combat Russia's growing extremism and potentially to expand USG cooperation with the Russians.
BURNS